



SCI&D SPIRIT

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CATCH the SPIRIT

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
VA Boston Healthcare System
Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorders

An Army Veteran and An Advocate for Others

After serving three years of active duty in the Army, Christine Griffin entered the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) with the second class of cadets that allowed women students. In 1980, while she was an engineering student, she sustained a T4 complete spinal cord injury (SCI) in a motor vehicle accident. She has been receiving her SCI care at VA Boston Healthcare System (VABHS) since 1981.

Christine successfully advocated to complete her degree at MMA after sustaining her injury. She worked as an engineer for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) before deciding to pursue a degree in law. She was a first year law student at Boston College Law School in 1990 when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed, and she subsequently changed her legal focus to disability law.

She has since held positions as a staff attorney and Executive Director of the Disability Law Center, worked in Washington DC as a Commissioner of Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC), Deputy Director of the Office of Personnel Management, and more recently as an Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Resources in Massachusetts.

When Christine speaks of her healthcare experience in the VA, she emphasizes that the SCI Team at VABHS has

been providing excellent and personalized care since her initial visit at VABHS. "The VA has always had a coordinated multidisciplinary, whole body, whole health approach that is invaluable. The SCI staff are specialized experts who see the big picture and provide an integrated approach to care."

She notes that while the general population is just becoming aware of patient centered care, Veterans with SCI at VABHS have been experiencing it for years. And for that, she is grateful.

When asked if she has any recommendations for fellow Veterans with SCI, Christine had the following: "Stay active and get the SCI Annual Evaluation- yearly." She believes that this exam is critical to maintaining one's health

after SCI. It is a thorough, multidisciplinary assessment of the person with SCI who may not feel the symptoms of certain health conditions. Christine highlighted that the added benefit of this appointment is maintaining contact with the dedicated SCI clinic staff who are always available for assistance.

In summary, Christine Griffin is a successful attorney and advocate, who has taken her experiences of living with a spinal cord injury, and used these to better the lives of others.



Christine Griffin, Esq.
Army Veteran

TEACH for Success: Learning New Communication Skills

In commitment to a model of care in which Veterans are full partners with their health care teams, VA Boston Health Care System is offering staff a program called *TEACH for Success* (T=Tune in to the patient; E=Explore the patient's concerns, preferences, and needs; A=Assist the patient with change; C=Communicate effectively; and H=Honor the patient as a partner). In each of these areas, staff can develop important communication skills that are typically not taught in medical school. I certainly learned a lot when I enrolled in one of the first sessions of this program, along with our Chief of Staff and several other Service Chiefs!

What can you, as a Veteran and patient, do to help your health care team do a better job in this regard? Be involved in *your* health care. Give your team accurate and complete information about matters related to your health, plan ahead for your visits by writing down questions and concerns you want to raise, share your ideas and beliefs about your health problems and treatments with your provider, let your health care team know about stressful aspects of your life that affect your health and ability to manage daily activities, ask questions, speak up, and participate fully in decisions about your health care and treatments.



Sunil Sabharwal, MD
Chief SCI/D Services

Focus is on Access to Care at White River Junction SCI Clinic

In 2013, two new members joined the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Clinic at the White River Junction VA Medical Center (WRJ VAMC): Michelle Turcotte-Smail, LICSW, and Freda Dreher, M.D.

Dr. Dreher, originally from upstate New York, comes to White River Junction from San Jose, California. She is board certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PM&R) and Medical Acupuncture. Dr. Dreher is an Assistant Professor of Neurology at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth.

Michelle Turcotte-Smail, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, earned her Master's Degree in Social Work from the University of Washington in 2001. She worked in various private hospital settings before coming to the WRJ VAMC in 2010, where she worked in Primary Care Social Work before joining the Spinal Cord Injury Clinic in 2013.

The staff at the SCI clinic is focused on increasing access to care for their patient population. They have implemented Telehealth into the Home and offer Inter-Facility Telehealth to the regional SCI Center in Boston.

Their focus is not only on timely access to care but also on access to multidisciplinary specialists that is necessary for patient centered care. The WRJ VAMC SCI Clinic is a cohesive team of personnel that includes: medical doctor, nurse practitioner, registered nurse, social worker, occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech therapist, neurologist, dietician, and pulmonary specialist. By the end of 2014, they hope to be able to offer medical acupuncture for pain such as headaches and shoulder discomfort. Working together, the team at the WRJ VAMC SCI Clinic brings a full range of care and services to their patients.



WRJ VAMC SCI Staff Pictured Left to Right:

Michelle Turcotte-Smail, Social Worker; Freda Dreher, Physician.; Tim Cox, Physician Assistant; Rhonda VanHise, Nurse and Program Manager; Mickey O'Malley, Health Tech

Fisher House, A Home Away From Home



The Fisher House serves Veterans and military families while their loved ones are receiving inpatient treatment at VA Boston Healthcare System (VABHS). The Fisher House has 20 bedrooms suites available to families and caregivers, and strives to provide a warm and caring environment. The house features a common fully stocked kitchen, spacious dining room, an inviting living room, laundry facilities and toys for children. There is no cost to stay at the VA Fisher House. Boston was the 46th Fisher House to be dedicated and the 15th house to be on a VA Medical Center campus.

The Fisher House has allowed the families of individuals with spinal cord injury and disorders to be with their loved one as they learn to live with their new disability. Veteran, Mr. David Buanno, is 70 years old and was transferred to VABHS for rehabilitation from Albany, NY. He suffered a traumatic spinal cord injury in August 2013 when a loose stock car tire rolled off the track, launched into the air, and struck him on the top of his head.

The Fisher House has allowed the veteran's wife, Linda, to remain at his bedside with daily visits especially during the holiday season. When asked what the Fisher House means to her she shared, "It has given me the opportunity to be here every day for David. It's a homelike atmosphere that brings me sense of security." She shared that she looks forward to her nightly ritual of going to the kitchen for a snack at the end of the day. She stated, "You can always find other wives and caregivers there to share your stories of the day."

Being at the Fisher House has meant being there for her husband in the comfort of a home away from home.

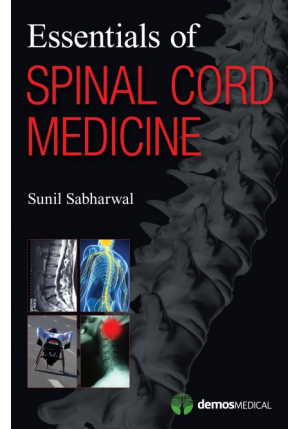


Congratulations to Dr. Sabharwal

The staff of the SCI Center at VA Boston Healthcare System extends our warmest congratulations to Dr. Sunil Sabharwal, Chief of SCI, for the 2014 publication of his book, *Essentials of Spinal Cord Medicine*, by Demos Medical Publishing.

As described on Amazon.com:

"This compact text is a practical, concise guide for clinicians involved in the care of patients with spinal cord injuries and disorders. It covers a comprehensive and diverse list of topics encompassing the principles and practice of spinal cord injury care, including basic science fundamentals, traumatic spinal cord injury, non-traumatic myelopathies, physical function and rehabilitation, medical consequences and complications of spinal cord injury, psychosocial and quality of life issues, and systems-based practice."

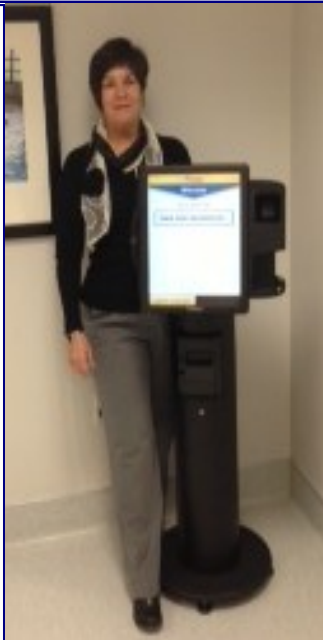


Look What's New

The VA has recently installed patient registration kiosks in all of the outpatient clinics. The kiosks allow patients to check in for scheduled appointments, preview and update demographic information and print lists of their upcoming appointments.

The spinal cord injury clinic has a kiosk located in the waiting area of the clinic. Patients have been receiving orientation to the kiosk as they come to the SCI clinic and feedback has been positive.

Carol O'Connell, SCI clinic medical support assistant, is knowledgeable with the kiosk and happily assists Veterans learning how to use it.



Pictured Above: Carol O'Connell, Medical Support Assistant, next to the new kiosk in the SCI clinic.

The SCI Network

The Spinal Cord Injury Service within New England is a hub and spoke network that works together to offer Veterans with SCI the most cohesive and coordinated care available.

As part of this effort, the SCI staff from throughout New England meet regularly to share knowledge and best practices, create inter-facility efficiencies, brainstorm about issues, and overcome obstacles.

The last meeting was held on Friday December 6, 2013 at the Bedford VA. In attendance were SCI & D staff members from VA Bedford, VA Boston, VA Central Western MA, VA Manchester, VA Maine, VA White River Junction, as well as members from PVA and NEPVA. Staff from VA Connecticut and VA White River Junction also joined the meeting via video conferencing.

Dr. Sabharwal provided VISN, service line and national updates. Marybeth Butler, RN provided data on the SCI Telehealth Program. Pradeep Mutalik, MD and Wendy Bellmore, RN gave a presentation on the new Scan Echo Program. All of the sites provided updates about the issues they face and their achievements and progress.

Caregiver Corner

Caregiver Health

Our Veterans' caregivers do a wonderful job of caring for their loved ones; however are they taking care of themselves? Data collected from caregivers at annual evaluations and during home visits in FY13 indicate that more than one third of them reported that their own health has suffered at least some of the time as a result of taking care of their loved ones.

We would like to take this opportunity to remind caregivers that their health needs are as important as those of the people in their care. Please remember to take care of yourselves, get sufficient sleep and keep up with your medical appointments.



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Facebook: VA Boston Healthcare System

Veteran Veteran
1 Veteran Way
Boston, MA 02122

uSPEQ... or You Speak: A survey of our SCI rehabilitation program

Surveys of Veterans who go through our programs is one important way of assessing the quality of our services. Understanding levels of satisfaction can point to areas where services have been effective as well as areas for improvement. The uSPEQ Consumer Experience Survey is designed to capture common concerns and aspects across various health care settings. Over the last year, along with other VA SCI Centers, we at VA Boston Health Care System (VABHS) have been receiving data from this survey of persons who participate in our inpatient programs.

We are gratified that our Veterans rate us highly in overall value (see below) as well on specific items related to service responsiveness, informed choices, respect, and participation; and we are committed to doing even better.

Overall Value of the Program

The graph to the right shows responses received for the following items about the perceived overall value from participants in our inpatient SCI rehabilitation program in 2103.

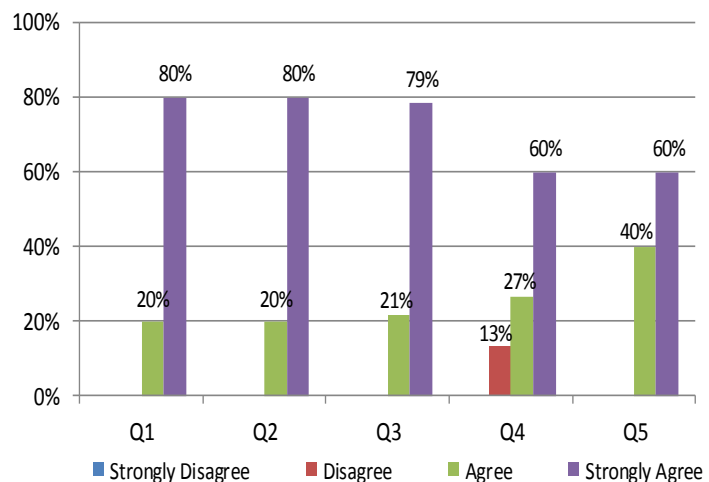
Q1: Would recommend to a friend

Q2: Services met my expectations

Q3: Felt safe here

Q4: Services enabled me to do things better

Q5: Met my need



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